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ABSTRACT

In response to the decline in thinking, reading, and writing skills, as indicated by the latest report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, this paper offers elementary school teachers one framework for a classroom writing program to cultivate a reading-writing-thinking connection. Based on six categories of B. Bloom's taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), each segment of the model is accompanied by intended student behaviors and model writing activities. Writing activities for prereading are also provided, along with suggestions for evaluation of children's written work and hints to help make the handling of papers more manageable. (HOD)

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THE READING-WRITING-THINKING CONNECTION

by Beverly Nordberg

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For teachers of reading, there is a bittersweet message in the latest report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the results of tests of thousands of children across the country. Learning to read in the early elementary grades, the ability of children to sound out words and phrases, has shown considerable improvement from tests given in 1960 and 1970. At these early stages, once a student has mastered the mechanics of reading, he is well on his way to success, since most material for beginning readers is relatively simple and straightforward.

Beginning in upper elementary grades, however, reading is more than sounding out words; the students must interpret what is read and draw increasingly complex inferences. The latest testing indicates that there is a crucial transition between reading in the early and intermediate years, and that students are generally not acquiring the critical thinking skills that underlie more advanced reading in literature and other subjects.

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There seems to be no agreement among educators as to why thinking skills have declined. Some of the explanations include more television viewing, less reading for pleasure, an emphasis on "basics" which shifted attention away from more advanced skills, and less attention to the teaching of writing. Whatever the causes, elementary teachers need to ask what can be done in the early stages of reading to produce more thoughtful, critical readers, who are better prepared to shift to more complex reading of later years. Teachers must give their students opportunity to

do lots of thinking, experimenting with ideas, and trying to tie things together.

The NAEP reports of 1980 show writing as another area in which many students have difficulty. Despite hopes that the back-to-basics movement would raise writing skills during the 1970's, the percentages of students aged 9, 13, and 17 who continue to have serious problems with writing remain about the same. Too often, it seems, instruction has focused on grammar and mechanics, not composition. Writing assignments are failing to stress the kinds of thinking skills mentioned earlier, not requiring students to generalize, analyze, synthesize, or defend their ideas. From many sides, ranging from popular magazines to colleges which find it necessary to institute special writing courses for freshmen, there is an awareness of the need for improved writing skills. Writing, it seems, is to be the emphasis of the '80's.

"Teach students how to think." That phrase, in some form or other, is part of most curriculum guides and teachers' manuals, and has been for generations. Recent research on the brain and how it works may help educators understand more about specific functions of parts of the brain used in thinking, particularly the provinces of the right and left brain. For the classroom teacher, teaching children to think can be a vague and mysterious sphere, difficult to measure, so that it's hard to tell to what extent one is successful. Stephen Judy makes two points about thinking which can give comfort and direction. Thinking, he says, is "vastly more complex and less rational than is often suggested...", and thinking is inextricably bound up with language. "The fully literate person uses language in every part of his or her life,

not just as a tool for communication, but as a process for knowing."¹ According to Judy, the comprehensive aim of elementary language arts education should be simply that of supplying as many different language experiences as possible.

Since it is impossible to get inside students' minds to see exactly what does go on when they're "thinking," educators concentrate on the output. Thus it is necessary to have behavioral goals which can be objectively measured, using terms that are not based on values or vague in their definitions. Then one avoids criteria such as "understands" or "desirable citizen," and uses instead more precise observable behavior, such as compares, classifies, and so on. Benjamin Bloom and his associates have developed a taxonomy of cognitive thinking skills, a classification based on intended behaviors of students.² Many programs for gifted and talented students use Bloom's taxonomy as a basis for curricular decisions; however, cognitive thinking skills are not limited to students of a certain category, but can be applied to all students in typical classrooms.

Writing itself is a way of thinking things through, of developing and rearranging thoughts. In the very act of writing, thoughts can be created. As the writer tries to clarify and express thoughts, he/she may go back to other writers to read what they have said, or how they have expressed it. More reading may lead to further efforts to try to define thoughts by writing; thus reading, writing and thinking are linked together in a never-ending chain. Smith speaks of that connection:

The only source of knowledge sufficiently rich and reliable for learning about written language is the writing already done by others. In other words, one learns to write by reading. The act of writing is critical as a basis for learning to write from reading; the desire to write our-

selves provides an incentive and direction for learning about writing from reading.³

The elementary teacher in a self-contained classroom has a particularly fertile spot in which to cultivate this reading-writing-thinking connection. Many children in elementary schools spend from two to three hours a day in language arts activities, almost all of that in basal reading instruction, with supplementary assignments from workbooks and drill materials. Other areas of the language arts curriculum are also taught, often in relative isolation, as separate subjects. Instead of having students do what has often been called "busy work," teachers can use this block of time to encourage more thinking activities, more writing, integrating all areas of the language arts curriculum.

Each teacher of writing needs to develop his/her own philosophy and way of organizing the writing program, realizing that there are many facets to the writing process and varying individual student needs to be met. This article offers one framework for a classroom writing program, a model to connect reading, writing and thinking, using Bloom's taxonomy as a basis for some of the activities. There will be suggestions for evaluation of children's written work, and hints to help make the perennial puzzle of handling papers more manageable.

Procedure

A story or other material to be read by the children is chosen, such as a basal reader story, a social studies chapter, or a weekly classroom newspaper. If the teacher begins with a story that is a personal favorite, the interest and enthusiasm are likely to be carried over to the students. A favorite of the children could also be chosen, one that the teacher knows from experience

has been well-liked. Be sure that a variety of material is included, especially writing from content areas; it has been estimated that 70% of children's reading after fourth grade is in content fields, yet they often receive little direct instruction in how to read and understand non-narrative material. Ask different kinds of questions, and let children generate their own activities as they become more proficient; they can be taught the difference between literal (in the book) questions, and "thinking" questions.

This model would probably not be used every day with every child or reading group, but could be used every week or two for in-depth reading and re-reading. Depending on the material used, the time-period might be as short as one day, or prolonged over a longer time; interests of children in a particular reading may change direction of the lesson as it proceeds, and the time may need to be expanded or condensed.

Writing Activities for Pre-Reading

To generate interest and personal involvement in the reading material, students can do brief writing activities before the reading is begun. Questions such as the following can be used:

1. Write a question you have about the subject of our reading.
2. What statement or question does the title of the story bring to your mind?
3. Look briefly at the pictures and write a question for yourself to keep in mind as you read.
4. Have you ever read anything about this topic or by this author that you can share?
5. Here are two unusual words from today's reading. Write down what you think they might mean, then read the

material to see if you can discover if you're right.

6. There's something strange in today's reading. (Be specific, without giving the answer.) When you discover the "secret" write it on your paper.

Student interest in such pre-reading writing can be sparked by using paper of different sizes and shapes: narrow strips, paper in the shape of question marks, topical cutouts, or a shape pertinent to the material. After students write their brief statements or questions, they can keep them at hand as they read, and use them later in group activities or discussions.

Reading the Material

Children may need to read the material more than once, especially if it is of high interest or is particularly packed with ideas and information. During the reading or re-reading, students can write notes to themselves, or jot down questions they may have. At times, they can also be directed to contribute questions to be asked of others, to be included as part of the post-writing activity. Working in pairs can be a variation of individual efforts; two or three children together are apt to have lively discussions and learn a great deal from each other.

Post-Reading Activities

Following is a detailed listing of the categories of Bloom's taxonomy, including verbs to define observable student behaviors, and suggested writing activities within the categories. From this list or your own ideas generated by the list, appropriate tasks can be selected, varying the activities and options from one time to the next. For example, one day each student chooses a teacher-suggested activity, and a student-generated activity, either his/her own or someone else's.

Reading-Writing-Thinking Model

Bloom's taxonomy is a classification of educational objectives concerned with the recall or recognition of knowledge and the development of intellectual abilities and skills. There are inter-relationships between the categories, organized from simple to more complex behaviors; objectives in one class are likely to make use of and be built on behaviors found in the preceding classes. The following six categories are defined according to Bloom. The intended student behaviors and model writing activities have been developed by the author.

1. Knowledge

Knowledge is concerned with literal recall of specific facts, concepts, patterns, sequences, methods, and generalizations; it includes knowledge of common terms used. Knowledge is information remembered or "filed," to be brought out of storage for use in solving a task.

Intended student behaviors:

Students will define, describe, relate, recite, memorize, identify, name, recall, recognize.

Model writing activities:

Find the definitions for ...
Describe the setting of ...
Identify the characters
List the characteristics of ...
What happened first, second, third ...
How do you make, do, find out ...
State what happens when ...

2. Comprehension

Comprehension is knowing what is being communicated, and able to make some use of material or ideas contained. Comprehension includes translation (to put into another language or terms), interpretation (reordering of ideas as in inferences or summaries), and extrapolation (making estimates or predictions).

Intended student behaviors:

Students will explain, defend, rewrite, give examples, paraphrase, summarize, predict, generalize, illustrate, compare.

Model writing activities:

Tell in your own words ...

Explain what is meant by the phrase, statement ...

What is the main idea, moral, rule ...

How is 'X' like 'Y'?

Why is this conclusion true (or false) ...

How does the author show ...

Illustrate (give examples) of three important. . .

3. Application:

Application means using an abstract principle in a new situation. It is the transfer of training, the application of knowledge to "real life" situations.

Intended student behaviors:

Students will apply, solve, show, produce, prepare, draw, change, modify, compute, manipulate, make.

Model writing activities:

Give directions for ... then follow them.

Using the material given, identify or tell ...

Design an experiment or make a picture to illustrate ...

What would happen if 'X' were changed to ...

Change the scene, character, to real life ...

What is the relationship between ...

Write a story to show the moral ...

4. Analysis

Analysis emphasizes the breakdown of the material into its constituent parts; the elements, relationships, organizational principles.

Intended student behaviors:

Students will outline, break down, distinguish, find evidence for, separate, classify, categorize, compare, contrast.

Model writing activities:

Tell which is fact, which opinion ... and why.

How does the author prove or make the point ...

Make an outline using the format ...

Summarize and illustrate the three main parts...

Separate 'X' into parts ...

Make a table of contents for ...

Look up abridged or other versions, and compare ...

How does the conversation show ...

What is the cause of ... the effect ...

Make a list of ... words, facts, categories ...

5. Synthesis

Synthesis means putting together of elements and parts so as to form a new pattern or structure, an integrated whole. This category most clearly provides for creative behavior, based on the framework given in the communication.

Intended student behaviors:

Students will create, develop, plan, invent, write, design, compose, propose, organize, combine, hypothesize, write.

Model writing activities:

Brainstorm, in a group, to list ...
Write your own metaphor, poem, story ...
Change the ending of the story ...
Organize a project of special interest ...
Give your ideas of how 'X' should have ...
Write a conversation, short play, to show ...
Relate a personal experience to demonstrate ...
Invent a new product; illustrate and explain ...

6. Evaluation

Evaluation implies making a judgment about the value of something, based on distinct criteria. "Opinions" are more emotive, more concerned with feelings rather than careful considerations.

Intended student behaviors:

Students will judge, appraise, criticize, compare, contrast, conclude, justify, recommend, value.

Model writing activities:

Tell why you liked (didn't like) ...
Give reasons why you think that ...
Plan a panel discussion on ...
Write a book review for a bulletin board, journal ...
Compare 'X' with 'Y' and evaluate ...
List reasons for ... reasons against ...
Find out the opinions of two other people, compare ...
Summarize and illustrate your favorite ...

Post-Writing Activities and Evaluation

Follow-up on the writing activities would ideally involve

the students in group presentations and discussions, on bulletin boards, in centers, and so on. The teacher, of course, will want to check to see whether students show evidence of having successfully accomplished the task assigned. If not, one should not be discouraged at first, since putting writing and thinking together is hard work for most of us, and the goal is not reached in a few easy lessons. If the class as a whole was off target, perhaps the next time the teacher could model the assignment, working it through with the students. Other helps to make the task easier at the beginning might be to have a simpler assignment, to start with more structure such as a partially framed paragraph or outline or open-ended sentences to complete. Many children need to begin with easy, success-oriented material, which can be left open-ended for more capable children.

The teacher will save time and energy by not regarding the writing as "material for correction." Research shows that red-pencil correction of children's writing does not help them learn to do it better next time. When writing is regarded as a process, every composition need not be a finished piece with every comma in place and every word perfectly spelled. Be sure, however, that students and parents understand the goals of the writing, through conference, checklists, and letters home. Following are some specific suggestions to help make the paperwork more manageable:

1. Resolve to enjoy teaching writing. Your enjoyment will carry over to the children, and motivation for writing will grow.

2. Evaluate writing in sharing sessions with students. Positive comments from peers and the teacher give guidance and

direction for everyone, without singling out problems of specific children.

3. Get children involved in their own learning by having them write questions, make choices, share proofreading responsibilities. They can make their own duplicated material or overhead transparencies and put up bulletin boards. A bulletin board put up by students often has more charm and interest to them, and it's easy to change often.

4. Regard writing as a process rather than a perfectly correct product. Students can keep folders of writing in process, including ideas for later work.

5. Don't try to mark or "correct" every paper. Plan tasks to stress the trait that you want children to learn, then check papers for that. As you go over papers, decide what students need to learn, and plan future assignments accordingly. Don't try to accomplish everything in one composition.

6. Use aides, parent volunteers, or older children to help in editing and proofreading. Older children can be taught to use checklists, reference materials, or follow a coded system for fixing mistakes; many children can take responsibility for "cleaning up" the mechanics of writing before it is turned in, if they are given specific instructions in how to go about it.

7. Use checklists or separate notes to evaluate rather than putting comments directly on students' work. Instead of judging each paper individually, gather several samples of a student's writing, commenting on the entire set. It may even give a better perspective on an individual student's work.

8. Involve parents in their child's writing by brief notes about what you're doing, or by lists of activities they can do with their boy or girl.

9. Give students time to write on their own, and to generate their own ideas. The best model could be another child's work; pairs or groups often work together successfully.

Rexford Brown of the National Assessment of Education Progress Office says that writing gives us a chance to discover ourselves and to clarify our thinking, and that such a program should be at the center of the educational process. Teachers not only need to get children "hooked on books" but should "so addict students at an early age to the emotional and practical benefits of writing that they can never again kick the habit."⁴

This is an edited version of a presentation given at The Wisconsin State Reading Association Conference at Stevens Point, Wisconsin, on September 12, 1981.

Footnotes

¹Stephen Judy, The ABC's of Literacy (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 60-63.

²Benjamin S. Bloom (ed.), Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1956).

³Frank Smith, "Myths of Writing," Language Arts, Vol. 58, No. 7 (October, 1981), p. 795.

⁴Rexford Brown, "The Writing 'Crisis'; What It Is and What It Ain't," Wisconsin English Journal, Vol. 24, No. 1 (October, 1981), pp. 8-9.